

The Sorrow Of Chinese Women

by FLEUR

Recent chatter about the status and rights of women on [blogging site] Douban and Weibo [China's Twitter] has prompted me to say something.

I think of my maternal grandmother, who's never getting along with my oldest aunt because of her sexist attitudes—what the Chinese call “valuing the boys and slighting the girls.” Before my oldest aunt gave birth, my grandmother happily sewed a small quilt for the “grandson” she was expecting, and went to visit my aunt with a bag of hard boiled eggs, only to find that she gave birth to a girl. She tore the quilt on the spot, dropped the eggs to the ground, and walked away immediately. This hurt my aunt a great deal, and the wound was never healed.



She suffers from sexism, and unconsciously oppresses her daughters and daughters-in-law even more.

Similarly, my mother cannot forget what my grandmother has done to her either. When I was young, I often spent time with my grandmother, and never found that she treated me differently. But when I was older, my mother told me that my grandmother had in fact never held me in her arms since I was born, because I was a girl. Moreover,

before and after my mother gave birth to me, my grandmother never took care of her, even though they both lived in the same district. I couldn't understand such “heartless” behavior on the part of my grandmother, until I got to know her more.

According to my mother, my grandmother actually never liked kids—or, she didn't like to have that many kids. But at her time, you had no choice: you had to marry someone, and then have babies.

There were no contraceptives, and once pregnant, you had to give birth to the child. Women had no status whatsoever in my grandmother's time. Women were not treated as individuals. They were destined to be wives and mothers, and if they failed at those, they were considered useless.

When my grandmother was young, my grandfather was often away because of work, so she had to raise five kids all on her own. It's not hard to imagine the amount of pressure she had. She often relieved her bitterness by beating up the five children, who have no memory of intimacy with their mother, while their mother never enjoyed the process of children rearing. Children meant endless messing around and more burden. Such indifference under pressure was not as bad as the children grew older, but my grandmother's resentment of the status of women made her unconsciously hurt more women. Compared to my grandmother, my grandfather's sexist tendencies were not even half as severe.

I think of my mother. She was born and raised in the army, married a military man and raised her own daughter there. She had a simple life. In that environment where discipline tops all, most families only have one child, and people are used to it. According to the policy at that time, my parents could in fact have a second child. But they were busy with work then, and there was nobody to help, so they gave up the opportunity.



The One Child Policy is better observed in urban areas. But it's often not the case for the countryside.

But this choice brought my parents enormous pressure after my father stopped serving the army. People from Guangdong province, especially those from the Chaoshan area, have very traditional views about having children.

Almost everyone my parents came to know—colleagues, friends, relatives, educated and uneducated—first reacted with disbelief when my parents told them that they have only one daughter. These people do not understand why my parents made this choice, and think that they shouldn't have, because having only one daughter is simply wrong in their opinion.

Years in Guangdong shook my father's beliefs as he became more and more conservative,

sometimes even displaying regret at not having a second child. The “education” he received from his environment made him feel that the rules he was abiding by before weren’t right, that he should have had a second child. This put a lot of pressure on my mother. Each time others asked about it, she felt like she was scolded. She was constantly reminded that she had not fulfilled her obligation. However, she never admitted her “wrongs,” nor did she plan to make up for them. She still thought she had made the reasonable decision. (And I think this is especially precious.)

But, to my disappointment, my parents still think that girls are girls. Every time when I made some progress in my career and reported to my parents in excitement, they would just say that the most important thing is my marriage. My mother often had a hard time falling asleep because of my “inactivity” in that aspect. In her opinion, marriage is that “1,” while everything else is just a “0.” If a woman doesn’t get married at the right age, no matter how many zeros she has, it all comes down to nothing. My father, on the other hand, often expressed himself in his own way: “If you are a lad, I wouldn’t say anything. No matter how late you get married, it’d be okay. But you are a girl. And a girl must...”



An extended family with eight kids? Not untypical.

I went down to the south at twelve as my father left the army. I had had no idea about the concept the Chinese call “boys are noble and girls are servile,” and had never felt repressed because of my gender. But once in the south, I quickly realized it was a different world. There was hardly any other single child like me in middle school, and it was common for one family to have two to three children. If the first child was a daughter, the family usually didn’t register her with the government, so that they could

hope to have a boy. If the first child was a boy, the family would usually hope to have one more. Girls didn’t count. And women as wives simply had no say in this process. The force of tradition was so powerful, the neglect of women’s will so complete, that if you were to dissent, you had to be

prepared to go against the whole family. In many cases, your own parents could become your enemies.

What I saw in the countryside shocked me: There were children everywhere. People did not restrain in child bearing. Compared to women in urban areas who were affected by the One Child Policy, women in the rural areas had more pressure, because they had no “legitimate” reasons to have fewer children. Many of my relatives have five to six children, often one child less than a year older than the other. There were so many cousins I couldn’t tell which was from which family. The most unforgettable were a few neighbors of ours, who had given birth to eight or nine children, until they finally got a boy. Those mothers suffered from child bearing. They were younger than my mother, but they looked ten years older than their own age. They were weak, slim, and always stayed silent. I had never seen a family of more than ten people. These mothers left indelible impressions.

Greater shock came from a relative of mine. This uncle had been a middle school teacher in the town for years. One day he took his daughter to our house and claimed that he wanted an operation on his daughter. My cousin was about twenty-four years old then. She looked fine, with normal height. There was no problem with her whatsoever. But my uncle said her arm had broken before, and the doctor didn’t fix her bone right, so now each time she extended her arm, there would be a conspicuous bulge in the middle arm which looked very unpleasant.

My uncle felt this would prevent him from finding a good son-in-law, that his future in-laws would not like his daughter because of this bulge. So he had to rebreak her arm, and reconnect the bones. Facing my opposition, he sighed, “You don’t understand what it’s like in the countryside. Many men are away as migrant workers, others take up drugs or gambling. There are more available women than men. It’s hard for a woman to get married! Your cousin is already too old to find a husband!” I asked my cousin what her thought was. “You can leave the countryside and work in other places, you know.” But my cousin stayed mild, “I listen to my dad.” My uncle was glad.

Women from the Chaoshan area are known for their virtues. As i live here, I often hear lectures about how women are “supposed to be” from parents, relatives, colleagues and friends, in the name of “wanting good” for us. The whole society constantly reminds you that women are not important, that they are ready to sacrifice and serve others any time, that they are willing to do all these. And it is very hard to be accepted by the society if a woman doesn’t meet all these requirements.



Girls are called "goner girls" because parents raise them for others' families. They will marry a man and leave their mother's house one day or another.

The status of women in the Chanshan area can be seen from the dialect, even. "Goner girl," this is what girls are called here, which means that they have to leave the family one day or another, that parents raise girls for

others' families. Women also call relatives on their husbands' side the same respectful titles that their children give them. That is to say, they are not their husbands' equal in terms of familial titles, and are at the same level as their children. (I don't know if this is the case in other areas. As far as I know, things are different in eastern areas like Shandong province, and Shanghai.) In an unfriendly environment like this, how much respect could there be for women? How many women could there be with independent will? Very few, I'd say, even if they've long been economically independent.

Discussions about the One Child Policy are really hot online these days. But if women are not socially treated as equals and lack forceful legal protection, if women are not free, cannot control their own bodies, then the so-called freedom to give birth can only become what a netizen termed "some men's 'freedom to overuse child bearing tools.' For these men, the problem is not women not having children. The problem is women not having children for certain men in patriarchic families." Before the rights of women are generally recognized by society, and when the convention of "valuing the boys and slighting the girls" is still deeply rooted, giving people more freedom to give birth may lead to more oppression of women in real life.

[Thanks to 蓝调共和 for permission to translate her work. To read her original piece in Chinese, please click [here](#).]

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